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John M. Coulter

THE WORK OF A UNIVERSITY

INAUGURAL ADDRESS

AT

LAKE FOREST, ILL., JUNE 15, 1893

BY

JOHN M. COULTER
PRESIDENT

MADISON, WIS.
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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

THE WORK OF A UNIVERSITY.

I can assure you that the numerous expressions of confidence and encouragement to which I have listened are sufficient to stimulate to the highest endeavor. However, every feeling of elation is swallowed up by the overwhelming thought of responsibility; but this responsibility shall always stimulate, never discourage. Facing the future boldly, hopefully, should be the normal attitude of every man; for everything that remains to him lies in that direction. Every past achievement, however great, is but the preparation for a greater one. But such a future lies not in the words or strength of any one man; else I should never utter the word or dare the deed. The promise and potency of any such prophecy lies in the earnest work, the loyal service of a host of friends. I wish I could send a thrill of hope and confidence tingling along the nerves of every friend of the University to-day; a confidence not born of desire alone, but the irresistible conclusion that comes from a calm survey of our present high vantage ground and the signs of the times. To my vision, all things are possible with us. Let me, however, commend this thought to you in the outset. The trustees and faculty, by virtue of their positions, are pledged to constant thought and action for the interests of the University. But with you, representing the great background of alumni and well-wishers, rests the greatest influence for success. Upon you depends the cultivation of public sentiment in favor of the University, which will find its expression in ample endowments and crowded halls.

Perhaps it is expected, at this time, that I shall present to you a policy, a sort of presidential message, that is intended to mark a new era in the history of the University. However, it is not prudent to outline a policy, and to profusely pledge one's self to many things that he may never be able to accomplish. It is far better to be chary of promises, and to turn one's whole attention to doing what he can. If, therefore, you are asked what line of policy the new President proposes to adopt, what he proposes to do to signalize his entrance into the University, please say for him that he has no other policy than to do the very best he can for its interests. In my study of the develop-

ment of a plant in size and strength, I have not observed that it has any other policy than to draw all it can from its environment, watch every change that may be for its advantage or disadvantage, make the best of what it gets, push out in this direction, probably withdraw in that, in short, strive to become a perfect example of a strong inward vitality adapting itself to and using its surroundings, until, unconsciously, it gains in size and strength and spread of limb, and many come under its shelter. Any specific policy outlined to-day may run athwart one's best interests to-morrow. Like the course of a vessel crossing the wide ocean, the only policy of a University is the purpose to reach eventually some distant point; but what tack may be taken to-morrow or next day who can foretell? "for the wind bloweth where it listeth; thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh or whither it goeth."

However, I have a few things to say in reference to the "work of a University" which may help us to a better acquaintance with each other.

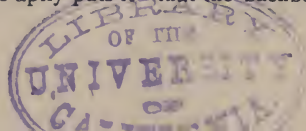
I. THE UNIVERSITY IS A PLACE FOR THE EMANCIPATION OF THOUGHT.

If called upon to express my conception of a University, I should say that in the largest sense it is a place for the emancipation of thought. The thought of man, fettered by ignorance or superstition, superstition which may co-exist with a high degree of intelligence, is the great mission field of all educational institutions. It has often occurred to me that the mission of a University is more a crusade against superstition than against ignorance. Its work is to cultivate not so much the power of thinking as of *logical* thinking. It is very hard for us to realize how much the wings of our thought are tied down by hereditary or thoughtless beliefs. The world contains untold attics-full of heirloom rubbish, and it needs an incendiary fire now and then to get rid of it. Second-hand opinions are by far the most common kind, and the whole effect of a University should be to make men think for themselves. The spirit of a University is therefore necessarily iconoclastic. There is an iconoclastic spirit which attacks existing beliefs simply because they are existing beliefs; and this is far enough removed from the spirit I would commend. The true iconoclastic spirit, which it is the mission of a University to foster, is not one that attacks but undermines all existing beliefs inconsistent with truth. Its destructiveness is incidental, of necessity, not premeditated. Habits of investigation and resistless deduction are the things to be cultivated and insisted upon; and when these

tempered weapons are turned upon any subject approachable by the intellect of man, they pierce straight through the mail of preconceived notions and reach the heart, the truth. From my point of view, this was the secret of the tremendous power of the greatest teacher of the principles of right living who ever lived. His clear statements of ethical principles pierced like sunbeams through the dust that men had raised about themselves. And so, I have said, the University is a place for the emancipation of thought, a place to encourage the spirit of true iconoclasm.

2. THE UNIVERSITY MUST RECOGNIZE THE INDIVIDUAL.

The truest idea that has found its way into modern University methods is the recognition of the individual. Sowing the same seed in all soils, of whatever diversity of soil or climate, surely commends itself no longer as a rational system of education. The old methods of education fitted pupils as contract clothing fits an army; it was full of misfits. The problem is not one of an undifferentiated mass, but of highly differentiated individuals, and if training does not recognize this individualism its adaptation becomes only a thing of chance. One kind of sound vibration may call forth a sonorous response from properly attuned strings; but the other strings remain silent and unresponsive. The duty of a University is to strike every note, that every string may respond; and this response is the evidence of awakened thought. I regret to say that there are still advocates of the patent medicine system, who claim that the same dose is suited to every ailment; and their sole argument is to point to the illustrious cases that have been benefited. Where, it is said, can you discover grander results of training than in the intellectual giants of the last generation? Have we any such in these degenerate days? It must be remembered, however, that men only appear gigantic when their associates are small; and I look upon these ancient giants, not so much as an evidence of fine educational methods as an evidence of terribly inappropriate methods which left them so many small men as associates. The seed that falls on good ground might well argue concerning the beneficent provisions of nature; but what of the myriads of seeds that fall by the wayside or on the rocks? The testimony of the one must be corrected by that of the other before any correct conclusion can be reached. To make every pupil think for himself is the sole mission of the University. In his St. Andrew's address upon "Education," Froude aptly puts it "that the backbone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of education must always be the ability to *do* something, and not merely to answer questions."

From my point of view, when Universities abandoned the old patchwork curriculum, and substituted for it elective courses of study, they changed from a false to a true theory of education. By means of it even the intellectually poor student of to-day is doing more, is developing more utilizable brain power, than the brilliant one of a few years ago; and we have no longer a race of giants and pigmies. Besides, it is not stating the whole result to say that even intellectually poor students can do much; but also students intellectually rich in certain directions have now a chance to cultivate their peculiar powers. The old system not only held down all the dullards but also repressed many of the gifted. It simply roused to great intellectual activity those whose cast of mind was adapted to the only kind of training given.

The change to elective courses, which is sweeping rapidly through our American colleges, is one of those cases in which there was a revulsion in the public sentiment long before it obtained a hearing among the colleges, encased as they were and are in mediaeval precedent. It is curious, that in this day and generation, when everything is making such marvellous progress and completely upsetting our old notions, that there should still be some to claim that the educational methods of one hundred years ago are still appropriate. To be consistent, such individuals should only ride in stage coaches and read by tallow-dips. If the University of the 20th century has not outgrown many of our methods of to-day, I should consider it a sorry record. The general public long since recognized that there was something out of touch between the old-fashioned college methods and the needs of the world. Of course the public could not formulate the difficulty, or suggest better methods. Only by sneer or flippant joke could it express its dissatisfaction. What the public said about college methods was little to the point, and it would have been absurd to have followed such suggestions. But the feeling indicated by this tongue-tied expression did mean that they were not getting from the colleges what they needed. It was a blind hunger that did not know how to satisfy itself, and could only grumble. Those who have recognized this demand for men and women with more utilizable brain power have suggested elective, individual work; and that is the answer given to this demand in Universities to-day.

3. THE UNIVERSITY IS TO PRODUCE SCHOLARS WITH CLEARNESS OF VISION.

If there is any one thing that the world needs now more than any other it is the ability and the courage to see things as they really are. We have discovered that seeing is not always believing, and how much more uncertain must be our reasoning. One of the most difficult things to make people understand is the enormous and often impassable hiatus between a cause and effect which they have coupled together. This is the very essence of superstition. You would be surprised to know of how many common beliefs of mankind it must be said "it does not follow." This finds exemplification all the way from beliefs as to the effect of the light or dark of the moon upon sublunary affairs, to those concerning "Providential interferences." It permeates all business, makes demagoguery possible, and is the foundation of the most of religious cant. It is used to confuse judges and juries, runs rampant in the divine art of healing, and perverts the religious instinct. Surely there is a wide field of usefulness here for the trained intellect; not for fierce denunciation, but for patient teaching. Denunciation masses and organizes opposition, and the fierce polemic blunts his sword at the first stroke; he really sheathes it in the act of drawing. But the voice of friendship disarms opposition and is on the highway to conviction. The effect of this leaven of scholarship is already apparent, and that it is "working" throughout society is evidenced by the demolition of many old idols and the tottering condition of many more. Many more people are beginning to smile at unfounded claims, and to demand a more evident relation between cause and effect. The flood gates of doubt have been thrown open, and in the first mad rush doubtless many things are thrown down that deserve to stand, but out of this whirl and confusion the truth will emerge.

In this connection "scholarship" should be defined. There is a certain kind of training which masks as scholarship and has no right to the claim. An old superstition is apt to give way to a new one, and both are to be alike condemned. That scholarship which does not see and acknowledge the good in all things deserves not the name. That scholarship which does not keep the mind open and receptive for all truth, from whatever quarter, has fallen short of its meaning. That scholarship which assumes that all that is old is false is still in its swaddling clothes. None of these attitudes of mind have an outlook broad enough to bring into view the whole sweep of truth. Too many scholars look out upon the world from the bottoms of their own particular wells, rather than from mountain heights.

I am free to confess that this mental attitude does not yet inspire the respect of the world as it should. It is too often accused of standing for indecision or mental flabbiness. For instance, there is still a spirit abroad which is inclined to decry those who venture to hold independent opinions in regard to matters of church or state. The decrying is just enough, if the victim is "independent" simply for effect, for an expression of independent views does not always mean unusual clearness of vision. Many a man is attracted to this position simply because it smacks of originality. Such light folk, "tossed about by every wind of doctrine," are not worthy of consideration; but the honest thinker, who is not posing for effect, but really has his doubts about many a hoary belief, is not to be accused of mental weakness. It is said that doubt will land one in a fog-bank, and that this is not clearness of vision. To recognise a fog-bank when it is present is surely seeing more clearly than not to have discovered it. The knowledge of one fact may lead to belief; another fact suggests doubt; a multitude of facts brings bewilderment. Certainty may often be an indication of scant knowledge or distorted vision; uncertainty may be indicative of vast knowledge and clear vision. Our lives are cast in surroundings which compel us to deal with numberless facts, and the clearest vision sees that we must grope our way, and that our best theories are but a temporary knitting together of the few facts in our possession. There is nothing more evident than as knowledge advances views must change, and that while three points may determine a curve, such a paucity of facts can never determine a true theory of the universe. The argument from common consent has long since fallen to the ground, for we recognise that one man may be right and all his fellows wrong; and that this has generally been the method of the introduction of epochs in the history of belief. The love of consistency in expressed beliefs has always been a bar to progress. That I believe one thing to-day and another thing to-morrow may indicate mental weakness; but it may indicate mental progress. "God offers to every mind," says Emerson, "its choice between truth and repose. Take which you please, you can never have both. Between these, as a pendulum, man oscillates. He in whom the love of repose predominates will accept the first creed, the first philosophy, the first political party he meets, most likely his father's. He gets rest and reputation; but he shuts the door of truth. He in whom the love of truth predominates will keep himself aloof from all moorings and afloat. He will abstain from dogmatism, and recognise all oppo-

site negations between which as walls, his being is swung. He submits to the inconvenience of suspense and imperfect opinion, but he is a candidate for truth, as the other is not, and respects the highest law of his being."

The striking at meaningless things, the relegating to a common limbo shadows which have no substance, the rigid demand that the relation between cause and effect shall be apparent, such is a part of the mission of the man of clear vision, and such a vision it is the duty of the University to cultivate.

4. THE UNIVERSITY MUST PRODUCE SCHOLARS WITH LARGENESS OF VIEW.

The world expends most of its force upon trifles. That largeness of view which gives a true perspective and brings a true estimate of the size of things is largely wanting. The things with which we may occupy ourselves contain essentials and non-essentials; to recognize the former means large-mindedness, and their cultivation tends to liberality, to see only the latter is the province of short vision and persistent attention to them will surely cultivate narrowness.

The Jewish Rabbinists played with the trifles of their temple worship until their writings became an enormous tissue of absurdities. This concentration upon unessentials, which acted as a harmless conductor to regions of dissipation for an immense amount of intellectual force, if turned upon the eternal verities of their religion would have shaken the world with the thunderbolts of truth. It was left for a Nazarene to deal with the essentials, and the effect of his single force, thus vitally directed, is seen in a world-wide revolution.

The philosophy of the middle ages amused itself with senseless riddles, and has left a record of its folly in folios as bulky as they are inane, chiefly serviceable to bibliophiles, and as a record of the most stupendous devotion to non-essentials. The well-known result was absolute intellectual stagnation. A few brave souls rebelled and led the mind of man face to face with realities, and there followed such a leap and rush of progress, such an awakening from death to life, that the world is said to have been born again.

For generations the divine right of one set of men to lord it over all the rest passed unquestioned, and the meaning of this leadership was entirely lost sight of in contemplating and perpetuating the empty fact. Presently the right was questioned, and political liberty became a universal doctrine. Shreds of the ancient belief may still be

seen hanging upon the rapidly attenuating forms of their debilitated wearers, but the mighty strength of the modern idea, which deals with substance and not semblance, pays them but the scant courtesy of a smile.

It is hardly a century since nature was considered but a mass of miracles, whose phenomena were to be wondered at but not questioned. Beneficent or destructive, she was a fickle goddess, and her variable moods only suggested the whims of a passionate but omnipotent being. Tempest and plague marked her wrath, which senseless incantations strove to placate. Sunshine and dew indicated her smile. Matter and life and this great globe itself were toys, to be hastily made and thrown aside. How man could have held this chaotic belief and retain his reason can only be explained by the stupor of insensibility. Thus phenomena, which presented themselves in myriad forms, and were really but unessential external expressions of deeper essential truths, were the only things seen or thought of.

Into the minds of certain gifted men, men of large vision, there gradually crept a notion of secondary causes. It must be that phenomena could be explained in a way that men could understand; at least the problem was worth the effort at solution. You all know the result of this attention to essentials. Chaos was reduced to order; whimsical government gave place to continuous, impartial law; matter and life fell into proper place and sequence; the scattered toys were found fraught with deep meaning; an awful majesty was breathed into the universe; and the race of man, freed from its shackles, sprang forward to such conquests over nature that to live a single generation now is more than to have existed during all the millenniums of the past.

I have brought forward instances of world-wide movements which have followed an escape from non-essentials. But the world is yet full of this stagnating spirit. Even in Universities, how much of the energy of student life is turned upon trifles, upon meaningless things, a process which must lead away from a broadness of mind, from a largeness of vision; in schemes of education, how much slavery to the letter still exists, the spirit, the real purpose of the system being forgotten; in medicine, how often does the divinest of all arts trip itself in the meshes of meaningless professional etiquette; in politics how often does self-interest rather than desire for good government obtrude itself; in society, how rampant are false notions of classification, in religious systems, how often is the divine soul-life strangled by theology. This

undue attention to non-essentials not merely narrows the vision and has its reflex effect upon the mind, but it is also the fruitful source of most of the jarring among mankind. The bitterest strifes the world has ever seen have arisen from meaningless things, Eternal truths, the essentials, are never in conflict; and it is the largeness of vision which has learned to recognize them that the University must cultivate.

5. THE UNIVERSITY MUST PRODUCE MEN OF CHARACTER.

The scholarly qualities that have been suggested can all be measured by their external expression. The utterance gives expression to the thought. From the mob of thoughts that come trooping to every thinking man, the scholar makes his selection for public presentation. He tries to choose his best and may create a false impression of his usual self. His house is bedecked for a reception, and all the finery he owns or can borrow is on display. This is perfectly proper, but it serves to illustrate the fact that in addition to the public, the display-self, there is the ordinary, the real self, nor can the one be taken as any measure of the other. I am familiar with authors through whose writings there breathes a purity and a charm, a clearness and sweep of vision, that is absolutely contradicted by their lives. Expression may reveal glimpses of a man's habit of thought. but may be entirely at fault as a revelation of his character. Character is that impalpable thing which cannot be communicated to another. You have perhaps met those who, you felt, possessed something finer than they ever said or did; a sort of reserved force which acts by its presence and not by any outward expression. This extraordinary force is one of the most powerful at work to-day among mankind. You feel its presence, this presence of the unspoken self, but cannot explain it. It is as real as the human form, but as impalpable as air when one tries to touch it. Why is it that you can feel one man's presence and not another's? What is it that gives you the impression of weight, of upward-looking, in the presence of some? The thing is purely relative, for your neighbor may not be so impressed, his channels of communication are not open to the influence. The scholar's contribution to society is but half made, and its effecttiveness vastly enfeebled, if to his keen, discriminating mental powers he does not add that vast reserve of soul-force known as character. The momentum that this adds to influence is immeasurable. If you would have your thoughts make their fullest impression, they must

have behind them the strong projective force of character. It is a perfectly familiar experience that the same thought uttered by two persons may be potent in the case of one and impotent in the other. Character is the letter of recommendation which calls favorable attention to the thought. With many, the effort is finer than the man; with a few the man is always finer than the effort. Almost any one can utter noble sentiments, but when you feel that the real self is mocking at them, of what force are they? Perhaps you have read enough of geology to know of the law which controls the transporting power of running water. Double the velocity and the carrying power is said to be increased 64-fold! I have often thought that the force of character doubles the velocity of any thought, and the effect seems out of all proportion to the increment. There must be concurrence of expression and character; and I would warn you my friends, who so hopefully are about to contribute your influence to society, that you must gird up the loins of both mind and soul, if your presence is to be felt, if you wish your effectiveness to be at all commensurate with your preparation. In conclusion, I must say that no University has any right to exist, that does not seek to strongly impress upon its students the exceeding beauty and strength of right living. Therefore, while all the varying beliefs and disbeliefs must meet here on perfect equality, as is befitting an intellectual community seeking for truth in every direction, we must all unite in *one* belief, that the only kind of life worth living is that one which is governed by the highest moral principles. As for myself, I find the best statement of these principles in the utterances of the great Nazarene.

This leads me to emphasize the well-known fact that it is personality that educates. Emerson says that "character teaches over our heads." A recent speaker has well said: "It is always the teacher rather than the subject taught that makes the deepest and most permanent impression on the life. No science can be so exact, no philosophy so abstract that the teacher will not give something of himself in giving the subject. The Athenians were all astray in thinking that Socrates was corrupting their young men, but they were not astray in recognizing the fact that it was Socrates himself who was working what to their minds was mischief. 'Twas not enough to appoint a censor over his teaching. The man himself must be put out of the way; that would be striking at the root of the matter.

It is, I repeat, personality that educates. The moment one realizes that fact in its fullness, then his chief concern as a parent or a citi-

zen will be with the characters of those who are set to teach. The teacher must know his subject to be sure, but unless that knowledge is molten by the passion of love and sympathetic interest in a human soul and borne on in the swift current by the energy of will, the equipment of knowledge is meager and inadequate indeed."

I greet you as members of a great community, with common interests, and presenting to the world a single aim. I have now cast in my lot with yours, for weal or woe; and I have come, not with the spirit of a ruler, but as the friend and companion of you all. From this time my welfare is yours, and yours is mine. I pledge you my most loyal and faithful service, not only collectively, but individually; and if with the same heartiness I can have your undivided support, the future has great things in store for us. With the fullest confidence in you, my friends and associates, and relying for wisdom upon its only known source, I now take up the burden laid upon me.

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